It's no puzzle why 'escape room' adventures are so popular

By Jessica Contrera January 16

You're Indiana Jones in the map room, positioning the Staff of Ra to reveal the secret location you've been searching for. You're Harry Potter in the TriWizard Tournament, and you must solve the sphinx's riddle in order to pass. You're the star of "National Treasure," and you've just found the red-and-blue glasses in the hidden brick, and now there's *another* message on the back of the Declaration of Independence.

You're you, trapped in a D.C. basement, frantically searching for clues to root out the spy defector, and the authorities are coming, and time is running out and —

"Do you want a hint?"

The voice comes through the loudspeaker in the corner of the room, and you're shaken from the adrenaline-fueled mission that had you feeling like an adventure-movie hero. Then you remember you're in a setup. That you paid for.

The name of the game is "Escape Room" — a literal description for a complicated endeavor. A team of people signs up to be locked in a room, and must find clues and solve puzzles to complete a given mission and find the key to escape.

After taking off in Asia, Western Europe and the West Coast, these attractions are popping up across the country. In the D.C. area, one opened in College Park, Md. in May, another that opened in Glover Park in October is already expanding and a branch of a New York

City room escape is set to open in Chinatown in late February.

It could be just a fad. Or, in a world where screens are the dominant source of entertainment, it could be just the kind of shake-up people want.

The escape room adventure in Glover Park starts with a descent into what was once a basement office, behind a Starbucks on Wisconsin Avenue. The room is packed with trendy, Pinterest-esque decor — chevron walls, barn wood, chalkboard art — a nod to the 20- to 30-something age group that escape rooms hope to attract. The spy theme is throughout, with accents of mustaches, maps and fedoras. The soundtrack sounds like it should be playing while James Bond orders a drink.

Overall, Escape Room Live D.C. doesn't feel claustrophobic and creepy, as one might expect from a basement adventure. The vibe is meant to be fun and cozy — as cozy as being locked in a room can be.

Here's how it works: A group ranging from two to 12 people is briefed with the story line by the "gamemaster." They are spies breaking into the office of one of their co-workers, who is believed to be leaking information to the enemy. Tomorrow, this evil spy is going to drop off information in a secret location in the city. The mission is to find out where. But as they enter the room, they will trip the security system. The door locks behind them and they have 45 minutes to find the key before being "caught."

The timer is set, the rules (such as no breaking stuff and there are no clues inside the electrical outlets) are recited, the door is shut, then it's go time.

The room (more chevron here) appears at first glance like a well-decorated office. Then, the group tears it apart, looking for clues. There are locked suitcases — where to find the combination? Books — will one contain a hidden message? Broken clocks — should you pay attention to the time it's stopped on? Mugs, flashlights, magnets, paintings, vases,

sticky notes, watches, trench coats, wigs, compasses, lamps, board games, playing cards. And in them or on them or under them are clues and riddles and puzzles whose answers lead to a letter that means a number that points to another locked box, and now it's feeling like "National Treasure" again, and the dad character is saying, "And that will lead you to another clue, and another clue!"

All the while, the clock is ticking.

"It's hilarious to see how different groups handle the pressure," said Ginger Flesher, the owner of Escape Room Live D.C. She's a retired math teacher and her husband, Darren Sonnier, works in intelligence. They first tried an escape room while visiting Prague this past summer. By the end of their trip, they had completed five escape rooms all around Europe, and Flesher was determined to open one in the District.

She and her employees have watched (via video monitor) hundreds of people tackle the game. During the week, her customers are typically co-workers using the room as an exercise in team-building. On the weekends, the groups are mostly friends, families or dates. She's had many birthday parties, a few bachelor and bachelorette parties, and is hoping to attract couples who want to use the room for baby gender-reveal parties. *Congrats, you escaped! Also, it's a boy!*

In the 12 weeks this escape room has been open, its reviews on Yelp and TripAdvisor have been overwhelmingly positive. That's seemingly true for escape rooms in every city, regardless of who runs them. Frank Lantz, director of the NYU Game Center, points to similar computer-based escape games as the starting point for physical escape rooms. He believes their success is unsurprising, given current trends in gaming. And Sigmund Freud, obviously.

"Freud has the concept of the repressed," Lantz said. "If you try to repress something that is a powerful force, it comes back in a stronger form."

In this case, the powerful force is the human desire to play games that are both social and physical. Sports have always been this way, for example.

"For a long time, video and computer games had become very solitary," Lantz said. "But now, we're seeing the emergence of the social and the physical."

Video games like "Call of Duty" allowed players to talk to other gamers playing at the same time. Then came the incredibly popular Wii, which was entirely about being physical while gaming. Today, video games are moving toward headsets that completely immerse the user in another world. Even games that are solitary, like "Minecraft," are commonly made social. Gamers live-stream themselves playing on Web sites such as Twitch.tv and post completed games on YouTube for others to watch and comment on.

Escape rooms tap into that desire for the social and the physical while also providing intellectual stimulation and a bit of a thrill. Some rooms try to make the experience slightly scary, to add to the rush of the time crunch.

"When we're just the right level of aroused — which can happen from fear, stress, anxiety, fun, et cetera — we perform better," said sociologist Margee Kerr, who is known for her work studying the effect of fear on the brain. "This is the well-tested finding that a little stress is good when doing something like taking a test or completing a challenge."

Escape Room Live D.C. is set up so about 30 percent of participants can escape in time without help from the gamemaster. But most end up with the minutes ticking down, wigs and trench coats and puzzles scattered all over the floor, stuck on some clue that they can't figure out or don't know they got wrong — the perfect time, most find, to decide on an answer for, "Do you want a hint?"

Escape Room Live D.C.

Reservations only. 2300 Wisconsin Ave. NW, Suite G-102, Washington, D.C. Tickets: $22.40-$28. 800-616-4880. www.escaperoomlive.com.

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